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Issue 4 (2015) — Performance: Circulations and Relations

Editors' Introduction

Stefanie A Jones and Eero Laine

ABSTRACT This issue of *Lateral* examines the means by which performances happen at a variety of scales of cultural production and circulation, from the street to the living room to the border; from a cellphone to the theatrical stage to the art gallery; from public discourse in policy debates to the global circulation of performances of blackness, alterity, and power. Trends across these various means are thus particularly illuminating for the study of culture; performance can give us insight into aspects of culture more broadly and with great ability to account for differences and dynamics of power.

In cultural production (and all consciousness is in this sense produced) the true range is from information and description, or naming and indication, to embodiment and *performance*....Thus a sociology of drama, already concerned with institutions (theatre and their predecessors and successors), with formations (groups of dramatists, dramatic and theatrical movements), with formed relationships (audiences, including the formation of audiences within theatres and their wider social formation), would go on to include forms, not only in the sense of their relations to world-views or structures of feeling but also in the more active sense of their whole performance (social methods of speaking, moving, representing, and so on).

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 139.

This issue began with the relatively simple idea that performance is integral to cultural studies. We asked for papers that explored the actions, processes, systems, limitations, and interventions of performance in and through specific cultural practices and ideas. Deemphasizing the product or the ends of performance we invited contributors to closely consider performance relationally and in circulation. The papers we received in response to our call surpassed our expectations not only for the ways that the authors embrace the idea of performance as process, but especially for the ways in which the authors intervene in cultural activities through performance and, in doing so, cut to the political quick of cultural studies.

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Taken collectively, these essays initially reveal performance at and as the frontier. Performance not only operates at, but defines the border: the US/México border, the border between blackness and white nationalism, between justice for and exploitation of

the body, between homefullness and eviction, the border between flesh and world. Performance both constitutes these borders and reveals them as permeable in their act of constitution. Relatedly, these papers are threaded through with considerations of the body—its limits, transgressions, histories, economies, affects, and technologies. On the cusp of the politics of culture, with the body acting as the hinge between habitus and field, performance uniquely precipitates these structures in the realm of cultural studies.

By contextualizing these various means of performance, these essays reveal their objects of study within their historical conditions. Thus we are very interested in the ways that this collection of essays engages performance's complicity in material power relations albeit in various times, locations, and politico-economic orders. Nonetheless, at the margins we find that, again and again, performance functions as the locus of exchange of capitals, and thus of negotiations over power. While some authors in this issue condemn certain performance-based means for preserving or advancing existing hegemonic relations such as capitalism and white supremacy, others seek the spaces that performance opens for certain subjects, even if they are often but not always openings for white, bourgeois US artists.

Our first article, from [Hillary Miller](#), takes up theories of the city, illness, and precarity via a variety of performances by New Yorker Annie Lanzillotto. Miller argues that as she struggles with survival and eviction in the city, Lanzillotto reveals the bodily and economic limits of the precarious artist while protesting the inequities of the neoliberal city. Through this unique and eloquent study, Miller exposes how neoliberalism acutely and chronically structures the contemporary city's spaces, socialities, and bodies, and explores performance's potential and complicity in the face of those structures.

[Leah Perry](#) presents a feminist history of Riot Grrrl and Kathleen Hanna in order to explore the hope and the limits of an individualist revolution in the 1990s. Perry takes on the performance of shamelessness embodied in Hanna's songs as well as through bodywriting, sex work, zine production, and other aspects of the riot grrrl movement. Ultimately Perry exposes the position of these performances: they are alternative youth culture for certain subjects which both work against and from within the structures of neoliberalism. Perry concludes that shamelessness might remain a promising space for an urgent anti-racist, feminist politics, if it can work to destabilize power and center women from oppressed groups.

[Alison Reed](#) investigates the border- and boundary-crossing performance of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's *TransBorder Immigrant Tool* (TBT), an incomplete cell phone program that offers GPS, guidance, and poetry to those attempting to cross into the United States across the Mexico/US border. Reed suggests a provocation-based performance of "queer provisionality," revealing the aesthetics of oppressive power structures by juxtaposing them to social utopias. Interrogating the national neoliberal project of both US liberalism and US conservatism, Reed's essay is also a transcription of the performances launched around TBT, the social and political machinery set into motion by Electronic Disturbance Theater's failed utopian project.

[Eunsong Kim](#) challenges existing literature on Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, articulating Sierra's neoliberal aesthetics as part of a process of managing the imagination of finance capitalism. By situating Sierra's performance art as a performance of terror, Kim argues that Sierra does not just collaterally reproduce capitalist power relations, but coldly and calculatedly exploits and violates the bodies of the working poor, particularly people of color, for his own profit and for the viewing pleasure of his wealthy audiences. Kim fiercely critiques the ways Sierra profits from his use of Marxist discourse and appeals to political

action. In doing so, Kim challenges scholars and artists to embrace the position of laborers and take up Black Radicalism against artistic instantiations of capitalism.

[Kristin Moriah](#)'s essay is rooted in extensive archival work in the US and Germany, examining the transatlantic circulation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through markets of performance and literature in and between Germany and the United States. The essay follows the performative tropes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from its originary political resonances to the present-day restaurants, train-stops, and housing projects named for the novel. Moriah reveals how the figurations of blackness arising from these texts are foundational to the construction of Germanness and American-German relations in the early 20th century and beyond.

Finally, the digital format of *Lateral* offers an enormous range of possibilities for working through Cultural Studies' approaches to the politics and performances of race, gender, class, and ability. Both Sheila Malone and Jade E. Davis take up those challenges and possibilities with digital installations on power and practice.

Malone's work is both [digital art piece](#) and [critical essay](#), which explores the queerness and the vibrating machine in light of both recent scholarship on objects and materiality and the author's own work as a performance artist. Malone's art cuts across and questions the divides between highbrow and lowbrow, permanence and ephemerality, the G-rated and the X-rated. The digital installation and accompanying essay understand the space of inbetweenness as a potential site for queer interventions into existing material orders.

[Jade E. Davis](#) embraces *Lateral's* digital publishing platform in what is described as a "found media journey" informed by the theoretical works of Zora Neale Hurston's "How I Became Colored Me" and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Davis intertwines these pieces, integrating and overlaying them with sound, static pictures, and live imagery to disrupt the act of reading and to raise questions related to "the performative role of translation" in light of the often difficult relations and circulations of blackness, gender, and language.

Our many thanks to our contributors for their fantastic work. We extend our heartfelt appreciation to Jamie Skye Bianco for a history of labor developing and sustaining the journal and for first inviting us to edit a guest issue. Thanks to Victor Peterson for programming an initial version of this issue. Our deep gratitude to Chris Alen Sula for the labor and patience to make the issue come alive, and masterfully and rapidly working through our many detailed requests and ideas. Finally, we are profoundly indebted to our many anonymous readers whose otherwise invisible labor made this issue possible.

[Bio](#)



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SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

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